

International Seabed Authority

Press Release



Twelfth Session
Kingston, Jamaica
7 - 18 August 2006

Assembly (AM)

SB/12/5
10 August 2006

SEABED ASSEMBLY BEGINS DISCUSSIONS ON SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPORT - CONFERENCE ROOM TO BE NAMED AFTER THE LATE DR. KENNETH RATTRAY, JAMAICAN JURIST

The Assembly of the International Seabed Authority this morning began consideration of the annual report of the Authority's Secretary-General which covers the organization's work since its last session and future programme of work.

Earlier, the 149-member Assembly elected Mr. Sainivalati S. Navoti of Fiji as its President for the 12th session. (See biographical note in Press Release SB/12/6). Mr Navoti, who is Legal Counsel at his country's permanent mission to the United Nations in New York, was nominated by Japan on behalf of the Asian Group. Also elected were the Assembly's four vice-presidents, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic and Kenya, nominated by the Western European and Others Group, the Latin American and Caribbean Group, the Eastern European Group and the African Group respectively. The Assembly also elected nine members to serve on the Credentials Committee for this session. They are: Australia, China, Finland, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, Namibia, Russian Federation and Tanzania.

In another action, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Jamaica, Senator G. Anthony Hylton, announced his government's decision to name the main conference room of the Jamaica Conference Centre, which houses the headquarters of the International Seabed Authority in Kingston, "The Dr. Kenneth Rattray Conference Room". Dr. Rattray, a renowned international jurist and former Solicitor-General, represented Jamaica for many years in negotiations leading to the conclusion of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Dr. Rattray, who died last year, is credited as being the guiding influence in the decision to choose Jamaica as the seat of the Authority.

Secretary-General's report

The report of the Secretary-General (ISBA/12/A/2), submitted to the Assembly under article 166, paragraph 4, of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, reviews the Authority's work since the eleventh session and outlines the progress of its current work programme 2005-2007. The current programme would continue to be implemented with emphasis on, among others, the following: the Authority's supervisory functions covering exploration contracts; the development of an appropriate regulatory framework for the future development of the mineral resources of the international seabed Area; and the promotion and encouragement of marine scientific research in the Area.

The structure of the secretariat continued to evolve in line with the proposals presented in the work programme. The technical capabilities of the secretariat had been further strengthened by the recruitment of a marine geologist and a geographic information systems officer. A major upgrade of the existing website - launched in 1997 - was planned this year to provide greater functionality and ease of access to users.

One of the substantive tasks undertaken by the secretariat during the reporting period was the continued development of the Central Data Repository. A bibliographic database was established this year, and it was intended to expand it to incorporate articles not found using initial search terms and selection criteria, including policy and legal documents. It will also include additional information on resources other than polymetallic nodules and the environments in which they occur.

The report also observes that Germany's application for registration as a seabed contractor, which was approved at the last session, represented confidence in the International Seabed Authority and in the system established to administer the resources of the Area. It was the first such new application to be made since the Convention on the Law of the Sea entered into force.

It notes that for the seven former registered pioneer investors, 2006 marks the end of the first five-year programme of work since contracts were issued. It therefore provided an opportunity for them to submit a comprehensive account of their work and the results obtained during the period as well as a review of their expenditure.

The report indicates that it was proposed to convene a workshop in 2007 on the standardization of environmental data and information required to be submitted by contractors under the new Regulations being elaborated.

Assembly discussions

All the members who spoke supported the decision of Jamaica to honour the memory of Dr. Rattray. It was also the general view of delegations - including Trinidad & Tobago, the United Kingdom, China, Belgium and Indonesia - that the Authority owed him a debt of gratitude for his work in helping to frame the foundation of the organization.

Commenting on the report of the Secretary-General delegates urged the 26 States parties that had not yet ratified the 1994 Agreement to do so, with the United Kingdom suggesting that the Secretary-General appeal directly to the permanent representatives of these states at the United Nations in New York. (The 1994 Agreement relates to the implementation of part IX (seabed provisions) of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.)

The status of contributions of members of the Authority was another area of the report that invited comments from delegates. Namibia expressed deep concern that more than one-third of members were in arrears for two or more years. It also called for further contributions to the voluntary trust fund and supported a proposal for the International Seabed Authority endowment fund for promoting marine scientific research. Other delegations echoed Namibia's concern about arrears and supported the need for contributions to the voluntary trust fund and the establishment of the endowment fund. The United Kingdom hoped that this fund could be in place by the end of this session.

Mexico announced that it would soon sign the Protocol on Privileges and Immunities of the Authority. Twenty members have so far become parties to the protocol which entered into force on 31 May 2003.

In light of the "dearth of knowledge" about the seabed and its resources, Namibia urged a cautious approach to the adoption of the draft regulations on the prospecting and exploration for polymetallic sulphides and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts in the international seabed Area. This view was supported by other delegations, including China which noted the limited knowledge on sulphides and crusts and recommended that formulation of regulations should proceed in parallel with scientific research.

On information and data relating to the international seabed area, the members of the Assembly welcomed efforts by the Authority to provide greater access to information through workshops and the planned upgrade of the existing website. Senegal called for further funding for improvements to information gathering and dissemination. Belgium wanted more information on inter-sessional activities of the Authority, and Australia suggested the development of a system of cross-referencing of data and information from relevant sources.

Statement by Jamaican Foreign Minister

Senator Anthony Hylton, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, in his statement, said Jamaica, in partnership with the Authority's Secretariat, had played an active role in providing the support necessary for the Authority to fulfill its mandate. He reiterated his government's commitment to provide an environment worthy of the Authority's mandate in administering the resources of the international seabed Area for the equitable sharing of economic benefits by the international community.

Jamaica looked forward to continued collaboration with the international community to build on successes achieved by the Authority in its dual capacity as host and as an active member of the Authority, as the organization tackled future challenges. Senator Hylton assured the Assembly of Jamaica's continued cooperation and support for the Authority's work.

The Assembly will next meet on Wednesday, 16 August, to consider recommendations of its Finance Committee on the Authority's budget and scale of assessments for the biennium 2007-2008. It will also continue its debate on the Secretary-General's report.

* * * * *